

**SOUTH PASADENA LOCAL HISTORY  
SOUTH PASADENA PUBLIC LIBRARY MATERIALS  
SUBJECT: RED CAR TROLLEY**

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# THE BIG RED CARS

## The Trolley Connected Los Angeles to Pasadena

BY FLETCHER H. SWAN

"Clang, clang, clang, went the trolley,  
Ding, ding, ding, went the bell."  
Those were the first few words in  
*The Trolley Song* sung by Judy Gar-  
land in the 1944 movie, *Meet Me In*  
*St. Louis*.

If you remember the movie, then  
you probably remember the trolleys,  
the Big Red Cars, that served South-  
ern California and especially the San  
Gabriel Valley. For those who don't  
recall that era, this will be a brief his-  
tory lesson about Henry E. Hunting-  
ton and his Pacific Electric Railway  
System that served San Marino,  
South Pasadena and Pasadena, and  
connected to towns all over Los An-  
geles.

Webster's Dictionary defines a  
trolley car as a public conveyance  
for passengers that runs on tracks  
with motive power derived through  
a trolley. The first electric inter-ur-  
ban railway in Southern California  
began operation in May 1895 origi-  
nating at 4th and Spring Streets in  
downtown Los Angeles and ending  
at Palermo (Fair Oaks Avenue) and  
Columbia Street in South Pasadena.  
Built as the Pasadena and Los Ange-  
les Electric Railway, it was named  
the South Pasadena Line.

The trolley line wound through  
downtown Los Angeles and along  
Pasadena Avenue (Figueroa Street)  
to Garvanza (Highland Park) span-  
ning the Arroyo Seco on a 900 foot  
trestle. Immediately after crossing  
the Arroyo Seco, the line entered  
South Pasadena near the site of the  
famed Cawston Ostrich Farm. Travel-  
ing east on unpaved, dusty and  
sometimes muddy Pasadena Ave-  
nue to Mission Street, then east on  
Mission Street to Meridian Avenue,  
the line made a northeasterly turn  
following the Santa Fe Railway  
right-of-way to Fairview Avenue.

At that location, the line turned  
north on a wood trestle over the Los  
Angeles Creamery facilities located  
on Foothill Street and gained eleva-

tion to Buena Vista Street. It contin-  
ued north on Fairview Avenue to  
Columbia Street where it made an  
easterly turn ending at Palermo Av-  
enue near the Raymond Hotel.  
There passengers could transfer to  
another line, probably horse drawn,  
operating north to Colorado Boule-  
vard.

A few words about the trestle  
over the Los Angeles Creamery fa-  
cilities which became Golden State  
Dairy around 1930.

In studying a 1908 photo of South  
Pasadena taken from the Monterey  
Hills, the trestle is very visible as the  
tracks climb the grade to Buena Vista  
Street. During the late 1940s my wife  
and I purchased a vacant lot on  
Foothill Street and later built a home  
on the property. During that time,  
while excavating and doing landscap-  
ing, I found what appeared to be  
miniature railroad spikes. Apparently,  
when the line was abandoned in May  
of 1912 and the trestle torn down,  
some of the railroad material was left  
on the property. From all indications,  
that trestle and right-of-way traversed  
the property we had purchased. Un-  
knowingly, we had purchased some  
locally historic property as it per-

BIG RED CARS PAUSE AT ONEONTA PARK  
JUNCTION IN SOUTH PASADENA ON JANUARY 1,  
1947, ENROUTE TO ARCADIA AND MONROVIA.  
PHOTO FROM THE COLLECTION OF FLETCHER SWAN



EFFECTIVE OCTOBER 5, 1947  
TIME TABLE 11



RAIL SERVICE



LOS ANGELES TERMINAL  
Main St. Station, 419 So. Main St.  
All Service Operates Via San Pedro St.

Pasadena Short Line  
Pasadena-Oak Knoll  
Line

LOS ANGELES—  
Main St. Phone  
LOS ANGELES—  
Loc. 122 West  
SIERRA VISTA  
Station  
SOUTH PASAD  
Cawston, Raym  
PASADENA—  
Fair Oaks. P  
call SY. 2-25

Subject

Schedule 11-1



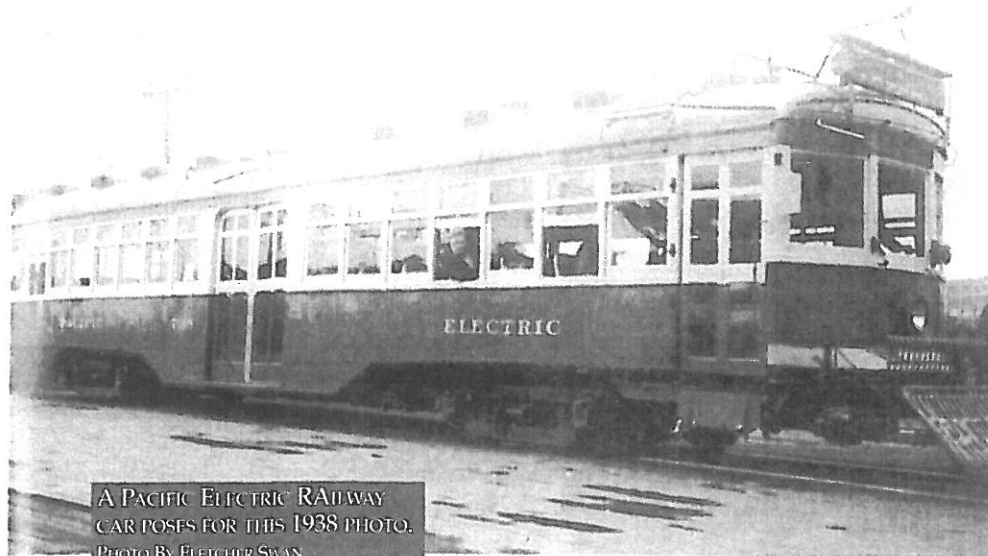
PACIFIC  
ELECTRIC  
RAILWAY  
TIME TABLE

Pasadena  
Short Line

Pasadena  
Oak Knoll  
Line



IN EFFECT APRIL 1, 1930  
Subject to Change Without Notice  
H. O. MARLER  
Passenger Traffic Manager  
Pacific Electric Bldg., Los Angeles, Cal.  
Sunday schedules will be operated on  
Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor  
Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas  
Day  
Form 11



tained to the Los Angeles and Pasadena Electric Railway.

Prominent capitalist Henry E. Huntington, while residing in the San Francisco area, served as vice-president of the Southern Pacific Railroad and played a vital role in electrifying the street railways. It was during a trip to Los Angeles in 1892 that he recognized the great potential of the area and had a vision of an inter-urban system along with land development for Southern California. That first trip to the Los Angeles area was to visit friends in San Marino. What he found during that visit were wide open spaces and sprawling ranches, with the population of San Marino at about 500.

When Mr. Huntington moved to Southern California in 1895 he learned that his long-time friend, James de Barth Shorb, who owned hundreds of acres in San Marino, was in financial trouble. In 1902, he purchased the 550 acre Shorb Ranch, which was to become his home and later the famed Huntington Library.

When Henry Huntington moved to the Los Angeles area, he believed there was great potential for growth and profit. His vision was to acquire vast areas of real estate accompanied by an efficient and convenient transportation system, the electric railway. Entering the inter-urban field in Southern California in 1898, his first venture was to purchase the Los Angeles and Pacific Electric Railway, the South Pasadena Line, in November 1901. With his immense wealth and experience, Huntington began

acquiring many short street railways, mostly horse drawn, along with large tracts of property. Close to 100 lines were consolidated into Pacific Electric Railway Company, which was incorporated in 1901.

The largest growth of the Pacific Electric Railway occurred between the years 1902 and 1906, but expansion of the various lines continued into the mid 1920s.

With the arrival of the trolleys, small towns and uninhabited areas were joined together and opened to growth and prosperity. We who remember and rode those trolleys, referred to them as the Big Red Cars. Leaving Sierra Vista Junction, which was located near the intersection of Huntington Drive and Main Street in Alhambra, the Big Red Cars traveling east would soon enter the City of South Pasadena at Alhambra Road and Huntington Drive and would stop at Monrovia Junction at the foot of Fair Oaks Avenue.

In early 1902, construction began on the Pasadena Short line from Monrovia Junction (later Oneonta Park) north on Fair Oaks Avenue on private Pacific Electric right-of-way to Monterey Road. Beginning at Monterey Road, the tracks were located in the center of the street, continuing to Mission Street and ending at Columbia Street. At this point in time, the population of South Pasadena was about 1,000 with very little automobile traffic on Fair Oaks Avenue.

To continue the line north of Columbia Street, Huntington deemed

it necessary to rebuild the bridge over the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad (later Union Pacific) and Santa Fe Railroad tracks to accommodate the larger and heavier Red Cars. Henry Huntington would build a 52 foot wide bridge, but the cities of Pasadena and South Pasadena pushed for an 82 foot wide structure. After a short period of negotiation in November 1902, both cities agreed to the 52 foot width and the new bridge was completed in 1903. The bridge now completed, the Short Line continued north to California Street, east one block to Raymond Avenue and then north to Colorado Street and the car house.

With the Pasadena Short Line now operating from downtown Los Angeles to Columbia Street in South Pasadena, passenger traffic diminished on the South Pasadena Line. That portion of the line from Meridian Avenue to Columbia Street was abandoned, but the tracks were extended on Mission Street, crossing the Santa Fe Railway at Meridian Avenue and ending at Fair Oaks Avenue. It was always easy for passengers to board the Big Red Cars at Meridian Avenue, as it was a required stop before crossing the Santa Fe tracks. The major portion of the remaining South Pasadena Line was abandoned in 1935.

The Oneonta Park Tract came into being in 1902 when Henry Huntington changed the name of the existing Monrovia Junction to Oneonta, the name of his hometown in New York. He described Oneonta Park as a model suburb with rail transportation to downtown Los Angeles as more than 750 Red Cars passed in a single day. The name Oneonta was widely used in South Pasadena – Oneonta Military Academy, Oneonta School, Oneonta Congregational Church, Oneonta Club, and many others. The Oneonta Tract encompassed several hundred acres in the area of Huntington Drive and Fremont Avenue, east to Fletcher Avenue and south to the Alhambra city limits.

The Oneonta Park Station was constructed in 1906 and had a small counter where tickets, daily news-

papers and soft drinks could be purchased before boarding the Red Cars. A tower located within the station housed an interlocking system which controlled all the switches at the Junction, including the Southern Pacific Railway crossing at Huntington Drive and Marengo Avenue. From the tower, the controller had a view in all directions. The Oneonta Park Station was demolished when operations were discontinued in late 1951.

Located less than two miles east of Oneonta Park Junction, was Wentworth Junction in San Marino, later named El Molino Junction. At this location in 1906, construction began on the Wentworth Line, later the Oak Knoll Line. Some believe the line was originally built to serve the Wentworth Hotel, which began construction in 1903.

The new line turned directly north from Huntington Drive, and was built across vacant land covered with a few trees and a forest of weeds. The new line was parallel to Oak Knoll Avenue, crossing Monterey Road, up the grade to the Wentworth Hotel. Red Car service began on this line on December 30, 1906, but the Wentworth Hotel was not yet completed due to lack of funds. During 1907, Huntington acquired the half-finished hotel and in January 1914 it opened as the Huntington Hotel. Wentworth Avenue, just north of the current hotel property, appears to be the only remaining reminder of that era. The Oak Knoll Line continued north en route to Colorado Street joining Lake Avenue near Arden Road. At Colorado Street, the cars turned west and continued to Raymond Avenue, and then north to the car house.

In 1903, with many inter-urban lines projected to operate in and out of downtown Los Angeles, Henry Huntington began construction of a Pacific Electric Station and office building located at 6th and Main Streets. When the nine story station/office complex opened on January 15, 1905, it was touted as the largest and finest office building in Southern California. After 104 years, the building still stands today.

The men who operated the Big



THE END OF THE LINE FOR THE ONCE POPULAR PACIFIC ELECTRIC RAILWAY'S BIG RED CARS. PHOTO BY FLETCHER SWAN

Red Cars, the motormen and conductors, were a likeable and dependable group. Conductors knew many of the passengers on a first name basis, as they traveled back and forth probably six days a week. In the early days, they worked 10-hour shifts at 18 cents an hour, or about \$12 a week. During 1903, the hourly rate was increased to 22 cents. At that time the price of a ticket from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles was about 15 cents.

During the years of World War II, the Big Red Cars moved the defense plant work force efficiently to such locations as the Long Beach Ship Yards or to Santa Monica near the Douglas Aircraft facilities. During 1942, I was employed by the Santa Fe Railway at their shops located at Washington Boulevard and Santa Fe Avenue near the City of Vernon. Due to government imposed gasoline rationing, I often rode the Big Red Cars to work, boarding the car at Monterey Road in South Pasadena en route to the Pacific Electric Terminal at 6th and Main Street in downtown Los Angeles and then walking one block to 7th and Main Street where I boarded one of the Los Angeles Transit Lines Yellow Cars for the balance of the trip.

The intersection of Mission Street and Fair Oaks Avenue was a hub of activity for the Big Red Cars and the people of the area. The Pasadena Short Line ran about every 20 minutes, handling passengers and dropping off bundles of Los Angeles

newspapers to the news vendor at the southeast corner. Until 1935 the South Pasadena Line terminated there. Within the Fair Oaks Pharmacy was a Pacific Electric ticket counter where time tables were available and tickets could be purchased for various destinations. During World War II, groups of Army inductees would board special Big Red Cars en route to Fort MacArthur near San Pedro for induction.

Up until 1951, ninth grade and high school students residing in San Marino attended South Pasadena schools. Some will remember the Pacific Electric "Student Special" that operated on school days, starting at Rosemead Boulevard, working its way along Huntington Drive, picking up students destined for the stop in front of the junior high school on Fair Oaks Avenue. Junior High students would walk across the street to school, while the high school students walked one block west to the high school. At the end of a school day, the operation was reversed.

All good things must come to an end. The largest electric railway system in the world at that time, the Pacific Electric Railway and the Big Red Cars reached the end of the line when virtually all operations ceased by late 1951, ending nearly 50 years of service to more than 50 cities. Closing the chapter on the Pacific Electric Railway, most of the nearly 1,300 miles of rail along with the trolley wire were removed throughout 1952.

What happened to those hundreds of Big Red Cars that served Southern California? Most were scrapped, but a few of the newer Red Cars were sold to trolley lines in foreign countries to live out their lives. Memories of the Pacific Electric Railway are still alive in the Orange Empire Railway Museum in the City of Perris just off the I-215.

A few of the Red Cars have been preserved and are in operating condition. They are on public display with other historical railroad equipment. Other trains and cars are on display at Travel Town in Griffith Park. ♣